

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**SHIFTING GEARS PROJECT
NORTH ADAMS**

**INFORMANT: SHERILL MCGOWAN
INTERVIEWER: GABE GABRIELSKY
DATE: MARCH 23, 1989**

**G = GABE
S = SHERILL**

SG-NA-T033

Tape begins with a briefing from interviewer: This is Gabe Gabrielsky in the offices of the Mass MoCA. The date is March 23, 1989. We're recording Sherill McGowan for the Shifting Gears Oral History Project.

G: Okay, where were you born?

S: I was born in Williamstown, literally, in a house, not in a hospital. And I've lived there for forty-two years in the same house.

G: Where were your grandparents from?

S: My grandmother and grandfather were from Canada, but don't ask me where please. Montreal I think.

G: Uh huh. Do you have any recollection of your grandparents?

S: They lived with us all my life until they died.

G: Uh huh. What did your grandparents do?

S: My grandfather was the janitor at the elementary schools for years, and years, and years. [G: Uh] My, my grandmother was what I call a professional babysitter. [G: Uh huh] She brought up every doctor's child in Williamstown.

G: Uh huh. Uh, did your grandparents ever tell you any stories about their youth that you can recall?

S: I'm sure they did, but nothing I can really focus on to be very honest with you. Uh, my grandmother and grandfather were married. My grandmother was fourteen years old when she got married. She didn't have much of a childhood [chuckle] I doubt very much. And then gave birth to nine children. [G: Uh huh] I don't really recall her talking too much about her childhood. She grew up very quickly.

G: Uh huh. Well that's important. The fact, I mean just the fact that she was, you know that she was that old when she was married.

S: Well she was (--)

G: The obvious reason to ask a question like that is, how far back can you push the oral tradition?

S: Yeah, right.

G: And if you can, you know, who is the oldest person you knew when you were a child? [S: Umhm] And what are the stories that they told about their childhood? [S: Yeah] That's about (--)

S: I, I really don't remember here talking that much. I think Gramp used to. Um, again, nothing I can really focus on right now, but (--)

G: Uh huh, okay. Um, what are your own earliest memories?

S: Of me? [G: Yeah] Uh, well I came from a split home. I had an older sister, six years older than myself. There were three girls in the family, two boys. I think the things that I remember the most were how difficult it was for my mother. Uh, my grandmother actually brought us up, because my mom worked constantly in order to support us. Um, my grandmother and grandfather lived with us from the time we were all born. They helped financially. Um, I think those are the things I really remember. How difficult it was. Um, back then, I know I sound a hundred, uh, I also went to a catholic school. That really sticks in my mind, because coming from a split home then was taboo. [G: Right] Made it very difficult for me in school. [G: Uh huh] Um, I remember working very young. Seems like I always had a job. Um, my brothers too. My sisters.

G: What, what did your mother do?

S: My mother worked, always my mother worked at Sprague Electric when she was a young woman. And then she went to half a dozen other plants. As she got a little bit older she managed theaters. Um, she is sixty-seven years old and still working.

G: Uh, she did production work at Sprague?

S: Yes she did. Yes.

G: I'm glad that you raised this. Um, there's something I haven't been able to figure out yet and

I'm talking to people who are family historians and that sort of thing. That there actually are a lot of people in the sample that we've interviewed who were (a) catholic, and (b) from, from broken homes. And that seemed strange to me when I heard it. [S: Umhm] Although I hadn't done a lot of interviewing, and I didn't pursue it more. [S: Umhm] Where it's come up, a few times it's come up with me uh, I've pursued it more because it's not, I'm aware of the fact that thirty-forty years ago it was especially, before Vatican II it was especially looked down upon in the Catholic Church.

S: Oh yes. Oh yes.

G: Um, where did you go to school?

S: Well I started in the elementary school. I went from kindergarten until the second grade. I went to catholic school from the third to the seventh at Saint Joseph's. Then I transferred again and I came back to the elementary school and I graduated from Mount Greylock.

G: So you lived in Williamstown [S: Umhm] and went to Saint Joseph's? So you took a bus?

S: Yes I did. Umhm.

G: And then you graduated from Mount Greylock.

S: From Mount Greylock in '65.

G: Uh huh. And uh, you were working, you worked through high school you say, after school and that sort of thing?

S: Oh yeah. Yeah.

G: What sort of jobs did you do?

S: Well my mother also owned the William's News Room on Spring Street. After school I didn't go to basketball games, or anything else. I'd take the bus to Spring Street and I'd go in the store and work.

G: How did you feel about that?

S: I enjoyed it. [G: Uh huh] I really did. Um, I suppose if I really wanted to go to the basketball games and the football games I would have gone. In enjoyed working.

G: Uh huh. Uh, so is that the first job that you can, you can recall having?

S: Oh gosh no. No, I started babysitting when I was about eleven years old. And I would do that on weekends.

G: Umhm. So after you graduated from Greylock, Mount Greylock, where did you, did you

immediately get a full time job then, or what(--)

S: No, I immediately got married and had a child a few months later. And when he was two weeks old I went to work to support him.

G: You immediately got married after high school?

S: And I almost immediately got divorced. [G: Uh huh] Um, yeah. My son was two weeks old and I got my very first real job. I was nineteen and I worked here. I was in the account receivable department. And I worked, I only worked here for about a year and a half.

G: You had taken a commercial course in high school?

S: Yes I did. [G: Yeah, umhm] Umhm.

G: And uh, okay. So, what was uh, when you, your job here, what was it like when, when you worked in the accounts receivable [unclear]?

S: It was a very large department. I think there was one male and probably a hundred women. You ought to try working with a hundred women. And all I did all day long was I had a calculator, and the file cards were this big and I just balanced accounts all day long.

G: Uh huh. Did you like it?

S: No. It got boring after awhile. It really did. [G: Uh huh, uh huh]

G: How long did you do that?

S: A year and a half.

G: And then what happened?

S: It was a medical reason, I had to leave. Um, doctor found a lump in my breast. I was put in the hospital, operated on. It was not malignant. But of course then I don't even, I don't know if that's true now. You have to stay out six weeks. I got to know my child in six weeks. [G: Uh uh] And I didn't work again for about two and a half years. And then (--) Do I have to go through my life history, every place I've worked? [Laughs]

G: No. No, I mean you don't have to say anything you don't want to say, but uh (--)

S: Okay, it would take too long. It would take more than an hour. I have been a secretary for twenty-four years.

G: Uh huh. Well I mean you sort of, after you uh, you left here and then you were, you took some time off [S: Umhm] to be with your child, and then you took secretarial positions and you moved around a lot.

S: Oh yes. Yes. Each time bettering myself, getting a little more money. [G: Uh huh] And twenty-four years later here I am.

G: Um, what (--) I appreciate the fact that you say, well you know, you did a lot of different jobs and that sort of thing, but is there any place where you worked uh, first of all where you worked longer than other places?

S: Oh yeah. Um, I am the type of person, I'll be very honest about it, I never stay at a job more than three or four years. [G: Uh huh] I've been very fortunate. Again I have always found something better [G: uh huh], more responsibility, more pay. And I used to feel there was something wrong with me until I started looking at it nationally. And I'm not the only person that does it. [F: Right] I guess the average person does change jobs every three to five years. And again I have been very lucky. I have always found something just a little bit better and a little bit more in my pocket. And I've learned a great deal in twenty-four years. Um, because again, each job was more challenging, more responsibilities. So I think I grew quite a bit.

G: Umhm. But there's none that stands out where you, where you, you spent a lot (--)

S: Well I've worked in the, I've worked in public sector and the private sector. I did enjoy working at town hall. I was there for a little over three years. [G: Uh huh] Um, the reason I left there, again um, I found something better. I went to work for Chester [last name unclear]. I was his administrative assistant. [G: Okay] I worked for him for a little over two years and I came here in September.

G: Was there any, in this period of time when you were doing these various types of jobs, was there any particular place which stands out in your mind as being particularly horrendous? Uh, you know, a place that you wanted to get out of quickly, or that wasn't very rewarding or challenging, or for whatever reason. You had bad relations with employers, or fellow workers, or (--)

S: Um, I don't know if I want this on.

G: Okay. Uh, we won't pursue that then.

S: Uh, I will say this. I, I liked working at town hall. When you work for a municipality (--) Well let me say this, normally I'm a very passive person, which I'm not really proud of, but I am quite passive when it comes to politics, things of that nature. When you work for a municipality, especially in your own town, you learn an awful lot. That disturbed me. [G: Umhm] Um, because I was not only working for one department, I was working for the building inspector, I was his assistant. But I also took minutes for every board, selectman, zoning board, planning, everything, which meant I had to go to meetings. And you do learn a great deal. Lots of things I didn't like. Um, again I was working with a lot of women. I think I found out twenty-four years ago I prefer working with men. I hate to stereotype us women, but women are moody, they're picky, uh, they fight at the drop of a hat. Men, you can get a man that's a real nerd, but generally most men are not as petty as women. Um, they don't get into office politics like women do. Um,

and when you're working that closely, and I was very close to everybody in Town Hall, it can be a pain in the neck. Um, I, I don't think I ever enjoyed that in twenty-four years. This is much different. I think this is the first job where I am still with women, but I have my own thing. And this really is separate. Um, I have to deal with outside interest. I deal with an independent auditor. I deal with the independent accounts. But yes, I do have to answer to Joe, and I have to have all kinds of figures, but I'm really just here. I'm isolated, yet I'm not isolated if that makes any sense to you. [G: Umhm, umhm] But I don't have to, I don't have to get into that click if you want to call it that.

G: Yeah, yeah. Um, in any of your past positions did you ever have to, were you ever required to belong to a labor union?

S: No.

G: No.

S: No.

G: Um, do you think that your closest relationships over the years have developed uh, from on the job or from outside the job? Friendships.

S: Um, I found, I've gone through, I've experienced two different things. The last job I left working for Chester, um, there was only two people in this office, myself and the gentleman I left town hall with. The past building inspector. We both left to work for Chester. And we had become so close, such good friends, I found that a problem. That may sound strange to you. I don't find real good friends in a job. That was the only instance. Um, because I've always felt my biggest asset is with the outside, anybody that's coming in. I love people. I try not, I don't think you really can get very, very close to the people you work with. Maybe there is some people that can do it. Um, I, we have a good rapor. No matter who I work with I get along with. But as far as creating a bond or a friendship, sometimes that can be a little detrimental. And I try not to do that really.

G: Um, what sort of activities (--) Certainly you have a family, what sort of activities besides your family have you been engaged in off the job?

S: I lead a very boring life. Um, I don't really have any. I have bowled with my husband. We were in a bowling league. Um, but other than that I think the past twenty-four years my time has been consumed by work, children, and a house. That's the extent of my life.

G: Do you attend church?

S: Yes I do.

G: What church?

S: We go to Saint John's in North Adams.

G: Um, it's an Episcopal Church?

S: Right. Yes, I tried Episcopalian for my husband.

G: I found that to be true in a number of instances too.

S: Many catholics are converted.

G: Catholics who had divorced became anglican.

S: Oh yes! Well I was excommunicated from the church.

G: Yeah. And it's sort of comfortable, because it's very close I guess in terms of the style of worship.

S: Oh yes, very, yes. Umhm.

G: Um, do you belong to any political groups, civic groups, organizations, associations, or anything like that?

S: No.

G: Um, how did you come to work here?

S: It was funny. Um, I ran into Andrea one day and I was just joking. And I said "gee, do you know anybody who needs a good secretary?" And she said, "yeah, I do." I said, "oh really?" She said, "yeah." And I said, "Oh, what the hell, I'll come over." And I got the job.

G: How do you know Andrea?

S: I've known Carol, her parents, for quite a few years. [G: I see] As a matter of fact I didn't know Andrea that well. I knew her other sisters, but not Andrea. It was just, it was really a freak thing.

G: Umhm. And uh, what is, what is the nature of your, specific nature of your job here? How do you spend your day?

S: I have to do all of the book work, which involves doing warrants just about every day, paying the bills. Uh, we just got a computer system in November. And it's a beautiful system. Um, but there are all kinds of reports that have to go into the state. There's quarterly reports, there's financial statements, uh, there's end of the month statements. Um, I not only do the book work, but I take care of another gentleman that works here and I do his secretarial work. Not a whole lot, because they do their own typing here, [G: uh huh] which I found a little strange, but. I take minutes for the Commission meetings when we have them. Um, I guess I'm a receptionist too. [G: Uh huh] Jack of all trades I guess.

G: Uh huh. And how long have you been here?

S: Since September.

G: Um, and how do you like it?

S: It's very interesting and I do enjoy it. Um, I hadn't gotten into book keeping in oh gosh, I can't tell you how long it's been since I've done it. Um, as a matter of fact that wasn't what I was really hired for. I was just suppose to be a secretary. Minutes, things of that nature. And then it turned into this. I like it because it does break up the secretarial humdrum. [G: Umhm] Um, and it's interesting. It really is very very interesting.

G: Uh huh. Um, what kind of, do you have any (--) I know that certainly [Kren's?] has a, has a vision of what MoCA is and what MoCA will do, although it seems to be limited to at least in terms of what I've seen published, seem to be limited to this space. Um, what is, what are your feelings about the potential of, of uh, your personal feelings about the potential of MoCA and what uh, what it's impact on the community could be, or will be?

S: I'm not going to pretend to understand it completely, or I know a heck of a lot about it. I may work here but my life consist of this book work. You ask me anything about the numbers about this place, fine. Anything else I'm not going to pretend. I have mixed feelings. Um, there are times when I can really understand the logic of it. How it's going to provide jobs for local people and how it's going [unclear]. And there are other times when I sit and say, is that really going to happen? So I'm not going to pretend to you that I fully understand it all. Uh, the last Commission meeting we had a couple of weeks ago I tried to sit and listen. We had the consultants here who were showing the plans that they had submitted so far. And what they were going to do for the commercial areas, and what they were going to do for this and that. And then the museum itself, which was very helpful to me to understand it just a little bit better. What I think boils down to one thing. Um, if it went through, yes, I think it would help the area, but how the tourist coming in. And I guess in the long run yes, that has to help downtown. Um, it has to help people who have motels and hotels. You may even have to build some more. Um, but I don't try to go beyond that and try to imagine what it is going to be like. If it could, if it could open up jobs for local people, I'd love to see that happen.

G: Umhm. Um, do you have any photographs, tape, memorabilia, artifacts, anything like that uh, oh, about this place that you would be willing to share with your project?

S: I don't have a thing.

G: Uh huh.

S: Nothing.

G: I've collected at this point over 200 photographs of Marshall Street going back to 1862.

S: Have you really? My mother may. [G: Uh huh] That's something I could ask her. She may have something.

G: Yeah. I would very much appreciate that. [S: Sure, sure] On um, on April 7, 16th at the Park [S: Umhm] on Sunday afternoon we're having a photo, a photo festival day in which Chris Galooly is going to be there. [S: Oh, okay] And uh, he's going to be set up to, people are going to bring in photographs they have. And he will, he will photograph the photographs right there. [S: I see] And then so you may never have to leave Chris's possession. [S: Oh, okay] And then when we, when he prints them he'll print two copies. And I'll get a copy and we'll send a copy to the person who donated the image.

S: I'll check with her. [G: Yeah] Uh, but we'll, we're actually, we're equipped to do that at anytime, but we're just especially equipped on that day because he'll have all of the equipment set up and everything. [S: All right]

G: Um, is there anything that you would like to add to your, in terms, particularly in terms of what it's like to work here. But anything, anything at all you would like to put on the tape.

S: I find this a very very nice atmosphere. And as far as working for people you couldn't ask for better people to work with. Um, the personalities really seem to flow around here. Um, it's just a real nice atmosphere. Not only the people that work here, but the people that I'm meeting. Uh, to be introduced to a German artist that I've never even heard of. [G: Uh huh] You know, I'm not overwhelmed, but it's impressive. [G: Yeah] It really is. And the people that come, they have a lot of interest in the project. It's amazing, and I really was amazed at the number of people that are interested in it. Nobody every thought the ball would attract that many people. [G: Yeah] Nobody ever thought we'd get that many friends you know, to donate. I think it's, it's really remarkable the interest that people have for the project.

G: Yeah. I think that that's true. That the ball in particular was a uh, the way it really took off.

S: Yeah, I think so.

G: It was quite impressive. Uh, okay. Well um, thank you very much for your contribution.

S: I don't know if I was any help to you at all.

G: Well you know the thing is um, let me tell you what this stuff is going to be used for. I've got I think thirty of them right now. I'm doing a video tape. [S: Oh really?] And I'm using, I'm using these photographs that I have and I'm trying to collect more and more. Right now I've got a hole in like the thirties and forties. [S: Yeah] But basically I've got very good early shots and good stuff in the fifties, sixties and seventies. [S: Good] I've picked up stuff, you know, current stuff. And uh, one of the things too is that I've talk to Andrea and it look like we're going to be able, we're going to take retirees on a walk. [S: Oh!] I would like you to do this actually since you work there to go (--) Where was the room that you actually worked in?

S: I think it was downstairs [G: uh huh] in this build, I was in this building I know that, but I'm

pretty sure it was downstairs.

G: This is building one, right?

S: Yes.

G: Yeah, most of the offices were in building one. [S: Yes] But, and we'll go through the, we're going to take a walking tour of the building with about a dozen retirees. Even some people who worked here when it was Arnold Print Work. And so they can say, well this is the space I worked in and [unclear]. [S: Oh yeah, yeah] And then we're going to put all that story verse and that together and a lot of (--) For example, one thing, I have a wonderful photograph of the 1927 flood when it tour this side of the building off over here.

S: Oh yeah, okay.

G: Uh, and um I didn't know about that. I hadn't seen a picture, but I had a guy who had worked, who had worked here when he was a kid [S: Uh huh] uh, when it was Arnold Print Works, and he told me the story about you know, the flood tore this side of the building off.

S: For crying out loud.

G: And then, then later, about two weeks later I got a picture of the side of the building [S: oh gosh!]. And so what I'm going to do is I'm going to use sound bites like that [S: umhm] that has voice overs, you know, [S: yeah] and he'll be talking about this. And so that's the kind of uh, the way I'm going to be using it for this video. And I'm also going to write an article for an historical journal about how work has, the nature of work has changed since the 1920's, which [S: that sound interesting, really] you just reminded me. I'm glad I talked about all of that, because it just reminded me of one other thing uh, that I would like to ask you. [S: Umhm] Um, how do you think, the subtitle of my, of my job, the project is called Shifting Gears, The Changing Meaning of Work in Massachusetts 1920-1980. [S: Umhm] And we have five other people like me at Heritage State Parks throughout the state that are looking at that question. And we're sort of grappling, because you know, how has the meaning of work changed since the 1920's? [S: Umhm] Um, so I can't presume, certainly you're allowed to say anything you want about anything. [S: Umhm] Uh, a lot of people would hesitate to say things about, about uh, a period of time before they were born. Um, but you certainly may. But how do you think work has changed, if at all since you started working?

S: Okay. Again this is just my personal (--) [G: Sure] Work hasn't changed, but people have changed. I think what I've noticed the most in twenty-four years is the style of person that's going to work today. I'm either very boring, came from the old school, was the way I was brought up, I don't know, but when I went to work and still today, I always to the best. Um, people today have become very I don't know if you can call it independent, uh, or this attitude I don't need you, but what I've seen is more and more employees telling their employer what to do, or what they're going to do, or what they're not going to do. And I saw that years ago. And I kept saying, well gee, you know, either I'm doing something wrong, or there's something wrong with this person. No, work hasn't changed at all, it's people. And I really don't know what the

key to it is, or the right word to use. If they're just very independent, or maybe they're, maybe they're a lot [unclear]. Uh, there are some very brilliant people in the work force today, and maybe that's why they have that attitude, because they can achieve something else and they don't have to settle you know, with something like that. [G: Umhm]

G: Okay. Well thank you very much.

S: I don't know if I helped you at all. I hope I have.

G: Everything is a help. [S: Okay] It takes a while for me to digest it all.

S: All right.

END OF TAPE